

“Whoever touches the mountain shall surely die.” (19:12)

The mountain represents a sphere of holiness that is beyond the reach of the average person. To penetrate the boundaries around it is intensely dangerous to the welfare of the individual. The *Chafetz Chaim*, *zl*, derives an important lesson concerning the reverence we must accord to a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar. A mountain has no intelligence and no feelings. Yet, simply because it was the place from which the Torah was given, it attained such an element of *kedushah*, holiness, that the people were admonished not to touch it. How much more so should we revere the Torah scholar who is proficient in the Torah, as well as possesses intelligence and feelings. One should be careful not to offend his honor in any way. Yes, the slightest offensive taint against a *talmid chacham*, an individual who is the embodiment of Torah, can be extremely dangerous to the offender.

The *Talmud Sanhedrin* 99a posits that an *apikores*, heretic, is one who is *mevazeh*, humiliates/ridicules/denigrates, a *talmid chacham*. In a second opinion, the *Talmud* goes so far as to say that even if one were to shame another Jew in the presence of a *talmid chacham*, he has already demonstrated his lack of respect. Thus, he is deserving of the ignominious title of *apikores*.

Rabbeinu Yonah (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 3:155), explains that *Chazal* are of the opinion that one who does not show proper respect to – or in the presence of – a *talmid chacham*, has thereby indicated that the Torah possessed by the scholar is not something of great value for which he must demonstrate esteem. Such a person is no different than he who desecrates the Torah!

Horav Aharon Kotler, *zl*, would often quote the featured address delivered by *Horav Yehudah Leib Fine*, *zl*, *Rav* of Slonim, Poland, at the dedication of *Yeshivas Kletzk* in 1930. *Rav* Fine cited the *Talmud's* (*Sanhedrin* 99a) question: “Who is an *apikores*? Individuals such as the men of the house of Binyamin, the physician, who would say, “*Mai ahani lan rabbanan*, What assistance do we receive from the *chachamim*?’ (What have they done for us?). They never found a dispensation to permit the consumption of a raven or a way to prohibit a dove.” This means that the Torah scholars have neither added to, nor subtracted from, the Torah. What is prohibited – remains prohibited; and what is permitted – retains its status quo.

Rav Fine asked: What, really, have the *chachamim* done for us? They have not innovated any *halachah*. It has all remained the same as it was when given on *Har Sinai*. Veritably, the question is the answer. This can be explained with the following analogy: A person who was ill visited the doctor, hoping to be cured. The physician prescribed a lengthy regimen of medicine, supplements, and vigorous exercise. The patient was to stick to this regimen for years. Twenty years elapsed, and the patient returned to the doctor with a complaint. He had strictly adhered to the regimen, but he had not fully recovered from his original illness.

The physician replied that, indeed, the regimen had worked. The greatest indication was the mere fact that the patient was still alive. Had he not adhered to the regimen, he would not be here today

to complain.

The lesson is obvious. During the last few thousand years, the world and everything in it has changed. Nations have come and gone, cultures have disappeared, monarchies have vanished. The only constant in the history of the world is the Torah. It remains unchanged in its pristine form from the moment it was given to us. It has been four thousand years without any alteration whatsoever. That is our Torah. We can still raise the question: What assistance do we get from the *chachamim*? What have we gained from them throughout the millennia? Well, it was the *chachamim* who have fiercely guarded the Torah, seeing to it that it continues to retain the same pure form as it had when Hashem gave it to us on Sinai.